CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH HYPERMARKET FRESH FOOD'S CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian food retailing industry is experiencing tremendous growth from the evolving modern fresh food retail outlets such as supermarkets and hypermarkets. This evolving pattern is influenced by the changing behaviour and lifestyle of local consumers, thus impacting on the way consumers purchase their food. Using a quantitative research approach, this paper examined customers' satisfaction with fresh food attributes in hypermarkets. Through a self reported questionnaire, 387 respondents were approached using a convenience sampling method. It was discovered that the majority of them are satisfied with the overall quality of fresh food products. On the other hand, they are slightly satisfied with the price and availability of fresh foods in the hypermarket. Overall, an understanding of the importance of fresh food attributes is crucial as it impacts tremendously on the customer's satisfaction.

Keywords: *Hypermarket, fresh food attribute, customer satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

The evolution in the food retailing industry has created a changing scenario in today businesses; the fresh food retail stores are being replaced by modern fresh food retail outlets (Goldman & Hino, 2004). The increasing population and rising personal disposable incomes have led to significant shifts in the demand for fresh food retail outlets such as supermarkets and hypermarkets (Chen et al. 2005). In the three leading Latin American countries, modern fresh food retail outlets accounted for 45-75% of sales (Reardon et al. 2005). It is reported that the hypermarket average share of the overall food retail sales, (excluding fresh food) is 33% for Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, and 63% for the Republic of Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines.

In Malaysia, the food retailing industry is experiencing tremendous growth with modern fresh food retail hypermarkets dominating the local retail trade (Shamsudin & Selamat 2005). They further contended that hypermarkets started penetrating the Malaysia market early in the millennium and are mainly located in the major urban centres. All hypermarkets offer soft lines (garments, clothes, carpets etc), hard lines (electrical appliances, stationery), groceries and fresh food. The last could be one of the major income contributors for the hypermarket.

In conjunction with the development of the fresh food retail industry, Ahmed (2007) articulated that the behaviour of Malaysia consumers has also changed in line with changes in their lifestyles and revealed that several factors, including an increase in personal disposable incomes, and a greater awareness of food safety and quality issues directly impact on the way the consumers purchase their consumables. Consumers now seek good product varieties, quality, availability, freshness and other attributes which create a favourable purchase behaviour toward those retailers (Baker 1990). Hypermarkets as a sub-division of the retail industry are operating in a competitive environment due to the changes in consumer needs.

Consumers formulate their experience based on satisfaction that is affected by several factors including product variety,

assortment, quality, and pricing policy (Morschett et al., 2005) thus evaluating the whole retailer offering by combining all the attributes in order to decide their degree of satisfaction (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006; Finn and Louviere, 1996; Kasulis & Lusch, 1981). The above notions clearly indicate the importance of understanding consumers' need for hypermarket operators. Several studies have examined the way that many of the fresh food attributes (quality, price, and availability) affect customer satisfaction (Gail & Scott, 1995; Bloemer & De Ruyter, 1998; Hackl et al., 2000). Nevertheless, both past and recent empirical studies mostly pertain to specific geographical regions or countries, like the United States, Western Europe and Australia. There is still scarce empirical evidence from a Malaysia retail context.

The study aimed to access the hypermarket's fresh food's attributes and customer satisfaction. It specifically examined consumers' levels of satisfaction with the fresh food attributes (quality, price and availability) in the hypermarkets

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Retailing Industry

The food retail industry is a sector of the economy in which multi-store retail outlets such as conventional grocery stores, shops, open markets and others are examples of the traditional food retail form. These types of retail forms were popular during the 19th century with conventional grocery stores normally offering foodstuffs, meat, seafood, fruit and vegetables, with some operators offering a mix of general merchandise items. However, in the middle of 20th century those food retail forms were gradually taken over by the hypermarket due to the increase in the public's income and the consumers who sought convenience products. The change in the global economy has shifted consumer demand and retailers' operating systems today are infused with far more technology than in the last decade and saturated home markets, fierce competition and restrictive legislation have relentlessly pushed major food retailers into the globalization mode. The opening of the economy by various governments to the free market has encouraged foreign

investment including supermarkets and hypermarkets to expand their wings.

The Malaysian Hypermarket Industry

The development of hypermarkets in Malaysia is in line with the development of international retail companies, which is evident from the many hypermarkets and supermarkets mushrooming in this country, especially early in the millennium (Abu, 2004). Based on reports, the hypermarket stores in Malaysia are also located in the new housing estates and new townships. Strong economic conditions along with the increase in consumer demand for niche and value-added products have led to the increasing number of hypermarkets. Hypermarket chains are rapidly growing in Malaysia to meet the needs of more affluent consumers due to changes in society's educational levels and consumers' shopping behaviour. In line with this, many foreign-owned hypermarkets and locally owned hypermarket are competing with one another. Intense competition among the retailers means they are frequently engaging in price wars to establish their presence as major players in the market. Shamsudin & Selamat (2005) expounded that foreign owned hypermarkets are fast gaining popularity in Malaysia, attracting customers with their "one stop" and "all under one roof" concepts with varieties of products including fresh food.

Fresh Food Characteristics

Four basic issues related to fresh food attributes which can attract customer purchase decisions are quality, price, availability and reliability. Sloan et al. (1984) argued that the quality of goods upheld a degree of freshness. Freshness is often cited as one of the most influential variables impacting on the consumers' decision to purchase fresh food (Munoz 1998; Verbeke & Viane 1999) and vice versa. Consumers are willing to pay more to purchase the quality food that they demand and will change if the quality is not up to expectation (Steen Kamp & Van Trijp, 1989). In line with quality, price also informs consumers about the value of the product that ultimately brings satisfaction to the consumer. This is based on Trappey & Lai's (1997) argumentation that retail outlets offering

good quality products at a lower price will attract more consumers and highly motivates consumers to buy goods from hypermarkets (Farhangmehr et al. 2000).

Another core element relating to fresh food attributes concerns stock availability for consumers and Goldman et al. (1999) further added more choice and variety of fresh foods. Zinkhan et al. (1999) reported that the majority of consumers shopped for fresh products at hypermarkets because of the variety of products available. Some regarded hypermarkets as product specialists that provide a selection of products from a narrow to a broad range of items. Farhangmehr et al. (2000) found that some consumers also preferred to shop at a hypermarket because everything is 'under one roof'.

a) Freshness

With regard to this attribute, Kennedy et al. (2004) deduced that product appearance, which comprises colour and the physical appearance, is used in order to judge freshness. Product appearance will determine its freshness, as at the time of purchase, consumers rely entirely on their visual cues. In fact, the freshness of frozen meat or fish is important from health perspectives and several methods have been established to determine it.

It is argued that weather affects the quality of vegetables, meat or fish sold in the open market, especially in hot tropical countries compared to countries with four seasons. In another vein, Goldman & Hino (2004) added that, in the developed countries, many consumers emphasized fresh products in their food preparation and hypermarkets and supermarkets are their options.

b) Quality

Sloan et al. (1984) and Steenkamp and Van Trijp (1989) manifest that consumers generally are becoming more demanding of food quality along with increasing individual and family income and are willing to pay more. With more consumers having a higher education and being more practical, Farhangmehr et al. (2000) and

Baltas & Papastathopoulou (2003) contended that customers have a greater concern for quality and price when purchasing food products. Quality and taste were cited as the most important criteria in selecting fresh meat in Scotland and the majority of participants in their study recognized that there was a difference in the quality of fresh meat between retail stores and hypermarkets. In contrast, Zinkhan et al. (1999) stated that the fresh meat available from traditional markets was of a higher quality compared to that available in the hypermarkets and the majority of their survey respondents cited the quality and freshness of fresh produce as the most important reason that they shopped at traditional markets. Quality has different interpretations according to different people and (Goldman & Hino 2004) using a different style in determining it leads consumers to buy their fresh food at a particular place (Zinkhan et al., 1999). According to Gomez et al., (2004), quality is seen as "a satisfaction in maintaining the freshness of the products" and improvements in quality have a positive impact on satisfaction, while reductions in quality of the same magnitude have a significantly greater chance of reducing satisfaction.

c) Price

Price is a powerful and convincing tool to attract consumers to purchase from a particular retail outlet. According to Pride et al. (2005), it is a tool which informs consumers about the value of the product and value ultimately brings satisfaction to the consumer. Competitive price was mentioned as a reason for consumers to buy their fresh food from other retail outlets, and retail outlets which offer good quality products at a lower price will attract more consumers. Trappey & Lai (1997) stated that offering lower prices is an important reason for consumers to shop and motivates them buy products from hypermarkets instead of at supermarkets and for higher prices at the traditional markets (Farhangmehr et al. 2000; Hsu and Chang 2002).

Pricing was found to be one of the most important attributes in grocery-shopping decisions and determinants of different customer groups (Carpenter & Moore, 2006; Baltas & Papastathopoulou, 2003). Consumers can be inelastic to price

changes for grocery purchases and price has a great effect on the value of the store (Sirohi et al., 1998). On the other hand, price was the weakest predictor of shopping and spending behaviour among consumers of supermarket chains in the USA. Although a supermarket is a self-service, it is certain that the service provisions to the customer in terms of the fresh produce area, bakery, cashiers and others are considered an important attribute.

d) Availability

In the hypermarkets, there are various stalls that sell fresh food and chicken, fruit and vegetables, fish, traditional cakes and several other ready food items. Traditional markets were viewed as 'fresh food supermarkets', providing one stop shopping for a large variety of fresh foods (Goldman et al. 1999). Hypermarket outlets are capable of offering a wide variety of food and non-food items to the consumers. The advantage of shopping at hypermarkets is that customers can buy other items at the same time. Farhangmehr et al. (2000) confirmed that Portuguese consumers preferred to shop at modern retail outlets because of the possibility of buying everything under one roof. When asked why they shop at shopping malls, the majority of respondents in Malaysia cited the variety of shops and products as the main criteria to shop in modern retail outlets (Mui et al. 2003). Supermarkets and hypermarkets are the preferred place for shopping in general.

Product variety influences a customer's perception of a store (Van der Vorst et al., 2002) creating the perceptions concerning product variety and influencing both satisfaction and store choice (Hoch et al., 1999). The availability of a wide variety of products is ranked higher as a store patronage attribute among department and discount store shoppers than specialty store shoppers (Lumpkin & McConkey, 1984), indicating expectations surrounding product assortment vary by store type. Conventional grocery stores tend to be larger than specialty grocery stores and are likely to carry a wider variety of products in their assortment than a specialty store. Supermarket shoppers ranked product variety third behind location and price as determinants of store patronage. Specialty stores focus

on a specific category or group of related merchandise categories, for relatively narrow target markets.

Consumers' Perception

A perception of a great assortment certainly influences store image and satisfaction with the store (Anselmsson, 2006). The degree of consumer satisfaction in five European countries France, Denmark, Finland, Portugal and Switzerland found that product quality is the most important attribute of store image. A study of the Danish grocery retailing industry cited in Carpenter & Moore (2006) identified that product assortment was the single most influential variable affecting the choice of retail format across discount stores, hypermarkets and conventional supermarkets (Carpenter & Moore, 2006). In addition, in a study in Greece, product assortment and quality were found to be the key drivers of customer choice (Baltas & Papastathopoulou, 2003).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a crucial issue for retail management (Anselmsson, 2006) that has been linked to a number of important outcomes, including sales performance, customer retention and loyalty (Darian et al., 2001; Gomez et al., 2004; Anselmsson, 2006; Martenson, 2007). An extensive examination of early studies in consumer satisfaction illustrates that most researchers define customer satisfaction, as a post choice evaluative judgment concerning a specific purchase decision (Bearden & Teel, 1983; Churchill & Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1979, 1980; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Bloemer & De Ruyter, 1998). Bolton & Drew (1999) and Boulding et al. (1993) identified two main types of satisfaction: the "transaction-specific" and the "overall" or cumulative satisfaction. From the transaction-specific perspective, customer satisfaction is viewed as a post-choice evaluation of a specific purchase occasion (Oliver, 1980, 1981).

In contrast, the overall or cumulative perspective suggests that satisfaction accumulates across a series of experiences with the product, which results in an overall evaluation over time (Anderson

et al., 1994; Fornell, 1992). Studies also claimed that satisfaction should be viewed as a judgment based on the cumulative experience rather than a transaction specific phenomenon (Anderson et al., 1994). Cumulative satisfaction in the retail setting can be interpreted as the result of evaluating the "shopping trip" and the retailer's offer in correlation with the consumers' fulfilled expectations (Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000). Thus, customer satisfaction in this study is defined as "the customer's overall evaluation of the store experience" (MacIntosh & Lockshin, 1997). As satisfaction is the overall evaluation of all stimuli affecting the customer in the store, it is certain that one can define different subgroups of customers with different levels of satisfaction (Morschett et al., 2005). In consumer research, it is commonly accepted, that different individuals react differently to the same stimuli.

METHODOLOGY

In accessing hypermarket fresh food attributes and customer satisfaction, a quantitative research approach was employed using a self administered questionnaire. Bahasa Melayu was used in the instrumentation to ease respondents' understanding of the subject matter. Several hypermarkets were chosen for data collection and by using the convenience sampling technique, data from 387 respondents were successfully gathered. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Before commencing the analysis addressing the objectives and hypotheses of the study, it is integral to understand the characteristics of the respondents. In line with this, the frequencies test against all demographic variables used in the instrument such as gender, age, together with average money (RM) spent per visit, frequency of purchasing and the general concern of fresh food attributes were undertaken.

Out of 387 respondents who took part in this study, 76.0 percent (*n*= 294) were females as opposed to 24.0 percent (n= 93) males. This is well predicted of both genders visiting the hypermarkets. With regard to age, 58.9 percent (n=228) of the respondents had an age range between 40-49 years, followed by 26.6 percent (n=103) from 30-39 years, 10.3 percent (n= 40) from 19-29 years, as opposed to only 4.1 percent (n=16) aged above 50 years.

On the average income per month, 39.8 percent (n=154) of the respondents earned around RM2500 or below, followed by 48.8 percent (n=189) with a range of income from RM2501- RM4500; 9.0 percent (n=35) received from RM4501- RM6000 and only 2.3 percent (n=9) earned above RM6001. Looking at the frequency of shopping, 33.1 percent (n=125) shopped for fresh food at the hypermarket once a month, 30.1 percent (n=119) twice a month, 20.4 percent (n=79) three times per month and 15.8 percent (n=61) visited more than four times a month.

In the same vein, on average spending on every shopping activity in the hypermarkets, 41.9 percent (n=162) spent between RM 101-RM 200, 32.0 percent (n=124) between RM 201-RM 300 while 16.8 percent (n=65) of the respondents spent RM 100 and 9.3 percent (n=36) spent more than RM300. On fresh goods in the hypermarket, 41.9 percent (n=162) were concerned with quality, 40.1 percent (n=155) with price, 30.4 percent (n=52) with availability and only 4.7 percent (n=18) were concerned with reliability. With regard to the information on fresh goods at the hypermarket, 54.8 percent (n=212) received information from the media, 20.2 percent (n=78) from word of mouth, while 20.7 percent (n=80) received information from other means such as brochures, leaflets, flyers and others, and 4.4 percent (n=17) from the internet.

Customer Satisfaction with Fresh Food Attributes in the Hypermarkets (Quality, Price, Availability and Reliability)

In response to the objective of the study, the mean scores on items assessing customer satisfaction with fresh food attributes in the hypermarkets (quality, price, availability and reliability) were

undertaken. A result looking at the first attribute, quality, is tabulated in Table 1.

From looking at the table, the majority of the respondents were satisfied with the overall quality of fresh products in the Giant hypermarkets (M= 3.51). They were also satisfied with the freshness of the fresh goods (M= 3.53), the physical appearance of the fresh goods (M= 3.54), the arrangement of the fresh goods (M= 3.57), the packaging of the fresh goods (M=3.59) and the cleanliness of fresh goods (M=3.57). Levels of satisfaction were further expressed with the specific items. This result indicates that the quality of the fresh food offered by the hypermarket meets the customers' needs as most of the customers were satisfied either with the overall or the specific products. Besides the quality of the fresh food, price is considered the most sensitive element which determines the propensity of customers to purchase at hypermarkets. In relation this, respondents' or consumers' levels of satisfaction with the price of fresh goods at the hypermarkets are analyzed.

As opposed to quality, the magnitude of the mean score shows that respondents in this study were just slightly satisfied with all the items related to the price offered. As such, respondents were slightly satisfied with the overall price of fresh food items (M=3.28) and slightly satisfied that this hypermarket provided affordable (M=3.35) and cheap overall prices (M=3.31). They also had similar opinions related to the consistency of the prices of the fresh goods (M=3.33).

Table 1: The Overall Mean Scores on the Quality of Fresh Goods

No.	Variables	n	M	S.D
	Quality Of Fresh Goods			
1.	Overall quality of fresh food items	387	3.51	0.747
2.	Freshness of the fresh goods	387	3.53	0.733
3.	Physical appearance of the fresh goods	387	3.54	0.728
4.	Arrangement of the fresh goods	387	3.57	0.745
5.	Packaging of the fresh goods	387	3.59	0.735
6.	Cleanliness of the fresh goods	387	3.57	0.765
7.	Quality of vegetables	387	3.59	0.706
8.	Quality of meat items	387	3.57	0.739

No.		n	Mean	S.D
9.	Quality of seafood items	387	3.52	0.778
10.	Quality of frozen foods	387	3.57	0.745
11.	Quality of fruit produce	387	3.55	0.781
12.	Quality of pastry and bakery goods	387	3.52	0.778

Scale: 1=Strongly dissatisfied, 2=Dissatisfied, 3=Slightly satisfied, 4=Satisfied, 5=Totally satisfied

Again, the same level of satisfaction was also given to the individual product. As such, the overall respondents were slightly satisfied with the price of fruit produce (M=3.32), frozen foods (M=3.30), pastry and bakery goods (M=3.29), seafood items (M=3.27), vegetables (M=3.23) and meat items (M=3.21). The overall result is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: The Overall Mean Scores on the Price of Fresh Goods

Price of Fresh Goods				
No.	Variables	*n*	Mean	S.D
1.	Overall price of fresh food items	387	3.28	0.796
2.	Affordable overall prices	387	3.35	0.776
3.	Cheap overall prices	387	3.31	0.731
4.	Price of fresh goods is consistent	387	3.33	0.784
7.	Price of fruit produce	387	3.32	0.776
8.	Price of frozen foods	387	3.30	0.756
9.	Price of pastry and bakery goods	387	3.29	0.703
10.	Price of seafood items	387	3.27	0.778
11.	Price of vegetables	387	3.23	0.770
12.	Price of meat items	387	3.21	0.757

Scale: 1=Strongly dissatisfied, 2=Dissatisfied, 3=Slightly satisfied, 4=Satisfied, 5=Totally satisfied

The availability of fresh goods is also important in the hypermarkets. Eleven (11) items were used in the instrument in tapping respondents' or consumers' levels of satisfaction related to this attribute. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: The Overall Mean Scores on the Availability of Fresh Goods

Availability of Fresh Goods				
No.	Items	N	(M)	S.D
1.	Overall availability of all local fresh items	387	3.27	0.765
2	Overall availability of all imported fresh items	387	3.26	0.738

3	The availability of a variety of fresh goods	387	3.28	0.726
4	The availability of local and imported frozen foods	387	3.30	0.723
5	The availability of local and imported meat items	387	3.28	0.716
6	The availability of local and imported vegetable items	387	3.27	0.765
7	The availability of local and imported fruit items	387	3.27	0.745
8	The availability of local and imported fish and seafood items	387	3.24	0.748

Scale: 1=Strongly dissatisfied, 2=Dissatisfied, 3=Slightly satisfied, 4=Satisfied, 5=Totally satisfied

Results of the analysis explicitly show that respondents or consumers were slightly satisfied with the overall availability of local (M=3.27), imported fresh items (M=3.26) and the availability of the variety of fresh goods (M=3.28) in the hypermarket. There were similar feelings about the availability of local and imported frozen foods (M=3.30), local and imported meat items (3.28), local and imported vegetable items (M=3.27), local and imported fruit items (M=3.27) and local and imported fish and seafood items (M=3.24). Contemplating the pattern on mean scores, a similar argument to the preceding one could be used. It becomes a normal practice in any hypermarket that after the price, the availability of the products is also important in attracting consumers.

CONCLUSION

Summary of the Findings

The results revealed that female customers outnumber male customers and this is not surprising as the hypermarkets as a central focus of this study usually have more women customers, particularly in the fresh goods section, although it is also visited by a range of consumers. The middle-aged group contains the highest number of consumers as compared to other age groups. The results also revealed that more than half of the consumers had visited the hypermarket only once. The average income of the consumers per month is between RM2500 to RM4500 and average spending per visit in this hypermarket was between RM 100 to RM 300. On fresh

goods in the hypermarket, consumers have greater concern with quality and price compared to the availability and the reliability of the service. Results also revealed that more than half of the total respondents received information on fresh goods at the Giant Hypermarket through the media and the rest received it through word of mouth and other means including brochures, leaflets, flyers and others, including the internet.

Results of the analysis clearly revealed that the majority of the respondents were satisfied with the overall quality of fresh products in the hypermarkets. They were also satisfied with the freshness, physical appearance, arrangement, packaging and cleanliness of fresh goods. The levels of satisfaction were further expressed with specific items like the quality of vegetables, meat items, frozen foods, fruit, seafood items and pastry and bakery goods.

As opposed to quality, respondents were just slightly satisfied with the overall price of fresh food items and slightly satisfied that the hypermarket provides affordable and cheap overall prices and with the consistency of the price of the fresh goods. In fact, the same level of satisfaction was also given to individual products such as the price of fruit produce, frozen foods, pastry and bakery goods, seafood items, vegetables and meat items.

Similarly to quality, analysis revealed that respondents or consumers were just slightly satisfied with the overall availability of local and imported fresh items and the availability of a variety of fresh goods in the hypermarket. Similar feelings were held on the availability of local and imported frozen foods, local and imported meat items, local and imported vegetable items, local and imported fruit items and the availability of local and imported fish and seafood items.

Limitations of the Study and Possible Future Research

It is worth highlighting the limitations of this study. Since this study was only focused on the one hypermarket, the

generalizability is not strong enough to represent the whole of the hypermarket consumers in the country. Therefore, the sample size should be gathered from various hypermarkets. Moreover, it is suggested that future research should make a comparison between different hypermarkets to obtain more meaningful insights with regard to consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

The second limitation is possibly related to the statistical analyses. Owing to the time constraint, this study solidly depends on the descriptive analyses by looking only at the mean scores, hence the result obtained only gives trivial outcomes. It is suggested that a comparison of the variables of interest could be undertaken using more complex statistical analyses to generate greater findings.

Implications and Conclusion

The summary of the research findings clearly shows that hypermarkets are among the modern markets that are popular and attract consumers in buying the household necessities including fresh goods items. This is evident when hypermarkets significantly receive a range of consumers from different backgrounds, incomes and educational levels. Added to that, it is no surprise that consumers have a greater concern with quality, price and availability of the fresh food. In fact, the importance of these three attributes has also been highlighted in many other marketing studies related to hypermarket perspectives and satisfaction with all these attributes also determines the consumer's purchase decision and loyalty.

This study also revealed that price is one of the most sensitive elements determining the propensity of customers to purchase at hypermarkets. In fact, satisfaction with the price of the fresh food products influences the customers' long term shopping at the hypermarket. This indicates that hypermarkets should be more sensitive to the prices of fresh goods offered if they intend to stay competitive among other competitors in gaining a big chunk of the market. As a conclusion, an understanding and prediction of customer needs is an important element for hypermarket operators and ensuring consumers' satisfaction, especially with regard to price. Other elements like quality and availability not only increase

consumers' purchase decision, but encourage repeat purchase behaviour and create loyalty toward particular hypermarkets.

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